



## First Responders: The Spirit of Volunteerism

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Texas's earliest settlers appreciated the wide open spaces of our vast landscape, but were quick to band together for the common good when an emergency arose. Nothing brought out that cooperative spirit more rapidly than the specter of fire.

In the smallest communities, citizens organized bucket brigades on a moment's notice. In those days, firefighting equipment might consist only of shovels, water containers and anything handy to smother the flames.

In 1845, a fire in San Augustine enveloped several buildings, but the hotel "was saved by the indefatigable exertions of the citizens who covered the roof with carpets and blankets and kept the front deluged with water thrown from windows."

In Houston, during the same era, authorities organized a paid company of firemen. But any major fire brought out an eager corps of civilian volunteers nonetheless.

Today, that spirit of volunteerism still thrives across Texas. Of 1,800 fire departments in the state, some 1,450 are all-volunteer, and another 250 combine paid and volunteer staff. These citizen-run operations cover the vast majority of Texas's 261,797 square miles.

Put another way, two-thirds of the 60,000 firefighters in Texas are men and women willing to volunteer their time and risk the dangers of emergency service to help their neighbors.

Recently, rural firefighters have been busy fighting fast-moving grassfires. Texas State Forester James Hull believes we have just passed the midpoint of a 30-year dry or drought cycle, vastly increasing fire risk across the state, especially in rural areas, where the dry conditions of 2006 were particularly perilous.

With a few other central U.S. states, Texas has had above-average rainfall so far in 2007—reducing fire risk in many areas. But, as residents of East Texas were reminded again this summer, danger is a constant companion for firefighters at all times.

Earlier this month, two volunteer firemen from Noonday, Texas—Captain Kevin Williams and Austin Cheek—made the ultimate sacrifice while battling a house fire in Flint, Texas. Two other volunteers were injured while trying to save their lives.

In June, Nacogdoches Fire Captain Joe Ed Ivy, a career fireman, died in Houston during a high-rise training exercise. Capt. Ivy's brother and cousin also work for the Nacogdoches Fire Department.

While their communities were shocked by these losses, it should be some small comfort to their families that these men died serving others.

In recent years, and especially since Sept. 11, 2001, the federal government has assumed a greater role in local emergency preparedness. Although the danger of terrorism is likely greater in urban areas, we have learned from Katrina and other disasters that after-effects often spill over into suburban and rural areas. Emergency personnel in all regions must be prepared and up to date.

In 2001, Congress created the Assistance to Firefighters Grant (AFG) program aimed at assisting rural emergency organizations to maintain readiness. These grants help firefighters and other first responders obtain equipment, protective gear, emergency vehicles, training and other resources needed for fires and related hazards.

Over the past six years, the program has made 1,437 grants to Texas, totaling \$123.6 million. These funds have helped most state fire departments keep up with potential problems that seem to multiply with increased population, weather cycles, human mistakes, and both domestic and international threats.

A byproduct of 9-11 has been increased appreciation for the role that first responders—police, fire and emergency personnel—take on the front lines. They are often the pillars of our communities, and they earn our respect and gratitude every day. It is well deserved.

*Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: [www.cornyn.senate.gov/column](http://www.cornyn.senate.gov/column)*